

## New Style in the Old West

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I recently visited Runamuk Guest Ranch, in a town called Roundup, Montana. The name is too good to be true, isn't it?

Runamuk isn't a dude ranch, one of those make-believe Old West theme parks that cater to tinhorns, city slickers and cowboy wannabes. No, Runamuk is an honest-to-goodness working ranch, which means that the couple that run it work and make their living from its 18,000 acres first, and host guests second.

That being said, rarely have I experienced the kind of hospitality that owners Toby and Jody Dahl dish out. Toby is both a rancher of the Old School and a high-plains visionary who recognizes that ranching will perish without change. Therefore, he's as comfortable talking about concepts such as grassland eco-systems and "sustainability through holistic diversification," as he is about livestock.



Jody has the gift of hospitality, doing everything from marketing the guest part of the ranch, to cooking everything from scratch, to raising two boys. Her sumptuous fare has been featured on the Food Network in a segment about ranch cooking. My take was that hers is more like down-home gourmet food cooked for wranglers. They don't serve blueberry-stuffed French toast around the chuck wagon.

The ranch, with its gorgeous landscape, rich history (five generations have worked it), cattle, horses, border collies and friends who drop by to visit, sing or help, was intoxicating. So much so that even I, of the off-key voice, was inspired to join Mike, the singing rancher, in a duet. And how could you not be giddy about finding a copy of Agri News in the bathroom?



At Runamuk you can do anything you want—work with Toby, learn how to ride horses and herd cattle, kick back in the hot tub, or all of it. It's also refreshing to hear the sweet music of jangling spurs and the clip-clop of horses, watch a border collie round up cattle the way a star athlete takes charge of a game, or just relax and take in the scenery. Toby says that 90 percent of his guests say that their stay exceeded their expectations. Why do they come?, I asked. "Some for soul searching, some have problems at home and some want to build self confidence. We know within 24 hours if they're a good fit."

I don't fit the profile. I went because I've been a Western buff—the culture, the movies, the music, the ethos—since I was a kid. Like most boys growing up in my era, I had a six gun and a holster and watched TV shows such as Cheyenne, The Roy Rogers Show, Wyatt Earp, Wagon Train and Have Gun Will Travel, as well as every movie western starring The Duke—John Wayne. My affection for these things has never waned.

So I was thrilled when I learned I'd be visiting a working ranch, not a simulation. A place where, Toby says, "A horse is just a horse unless he has a job," and barbed wire is not an anachronism but a tool to maintain order. And on the Dahl ranch, everything from livestock to trees—has a purpose.

One of the horses' jobs is to carry guests, and I wanted to ride, so before I left New York I picked up some horse sense from a book called *The Cowboy at Work* and at the Babylon (Long Island) Riding Center. Among the things I learned: Horses detect fear, don't walk behind them and stay firmly on the saddle. That last one stuck with me. Toby had a few other tips, such as a horse has to be told what to do and that a horse is never safer than when he's paying attention. That makes two of us.



I rode Jack and Hammer, which had been Toby's horse for three years. He was a little lazy and constantly snacked on grass, but he was a good mount. One of my jobs was to help round up cattle—450 head over two days. Believe me, it's one thing watching a round up on Lonesome Dove, and another to actually do it—especially when a bull locks his eyes on you, or a few heifers wander from the herd and have to be driven back.

My ranch visit was an adventure, but more than that, it was an insider's view of the rough-and-tumble lives of those who are keeping a rich part of our heritage alive.